



## Creative Community Profiles

### ASHE COUNTY

Ashe County is tucked into the northwestern corner of the North Carolina mountains. It has a strong sense of place-based identity in its locale and as part of the “High Country.” Unlike many remote rural regions, however, it has a reputation for welcoming newcomers. Many people describe experiences of arriving in Ashe County as a stranger and being immediately made to feel at home by people who had lived in the region for generations. This openness is a key part of what gives creative industries a competitive edge here.

In Ashe County, the retiree and second home residents seem to have a very strong sense of belonging and place—enough so that many of them seek out forms of civic engagement related to the arts. They participate in the area’s artistic offerings and events, and provide such an enthusiastic audience for traveling performances of classical music and theater that the area attracts many more of these tours than would be expected based on the size of its population alone. In particular, these residents, who have high levels of disposable income, provide a steady market for the area’s tradition-based art and artisan craft goods. Most of them identify with the area’s history and prefer not to be in a home that could be anywhere, instead appointing their homes with art and craft goods that show a strong connection with the area’s aesthetic traditions.

Two initiatives plan to build upon the area’s heritage-based aesthetic appeal to achieve greater economic viability. The Ashe County Arts Council has a long-term plan to establish a craft school that would build on the region’s artistic heritage and its current artistic and artisan activity. Not only would it serve to enhance the skills of those artists and artisans already living in the region, it would also attract others who might then stay; and it would become a destination for visitors who want to see crafts made and purchase crafts from the region. A woodworking crafts program is being discussed at Wilkes Community College (which has an Ashe campus) to train construction and other building trades workers who will help to drive the rapidly growing second home construction industry. This industry is seeking workers who are skilled in building trades but also have the ability to incorporate distinctive aesthetic content and artisan goods into their work—and these workers are quite difficult to find. The program would foster the growth of artisan-based small businesses that supply the building industry with items such as custom mantels, cabinetry, doors, and other artisan-crafted elements of a building.

### FORSYTH COUNTY

Forsyth County has two nearly parallel strands of the creative economy: design industries and heritage-based tourism industries. They intersect in the initiative underway at Old Salem to bring traditional Moravian designs to contemporary design-based manufacturers in the furniture and textile industries. The design industry has grown steadily over the past fifteen years. In the early 1990s, there were no more than four or five design firms in Winston-Salem; today there are about 35, mostly small businesses. The importance of the design industry lies not so much in the scale of employment, but in the establishment of the city as a place with interesting, creativity-based employment and a “scene” that corresponds to the people who seek these jobs.

## Connections with Local Cultural Traditions and Heritage

Many places have a rich history that could contribute in some way to the local economy—yet because no specific initiative has been put in place to build upon this history, it has little impact on the economy. *Every* place has a history—and many places have extremely colorful histories which can strengthen community identity and draw visitors. What matters is how the region connects to and builds upon its heritage. Without some kind of present-day communication about and engagement in a place’s historical traditions, they lose their reality for younger generations—and also lose their potential for economic impact.

In Beaufort County, the most significant initiatives involve ties among the historic downtowns in Washington and Bath and the tourism industry, positioning Beaufort County more as a distinctive *place* than would be the case if the area were offering only the waterfront amenities available elsewhere along the coast. Incorporating Beaufort’s history into its tourism industry allows that industry to offer something unique to Beaufort.

In Forsyth County, connections to the Moravian community and its aesthetic traditions are infused not only into its tourism industry, but are being innovatively parleyed into new sources of ideas for the region’s manufacturers. Firms in the furniture and textile industries are working with Old Salem to identify patterns and designs common in Moravian furniture and fabrics, and incorporate these into their contemporary offerings. The resulting products are then offered both as part of the manufacturers’ product lines and are sold in Old Salem stores. (This inventive practice is being effectively used by firms in industries that are, for the most part, in decline in North Carolina—except in those high-end niche firms that are continually seeking out new and distinctive sources of aesthetic and design input, particularly sources that are integrally connected to the place in which they originate.)

Ashe County is undertaking a project that similarly seeks to incorporate the designs of its local craft traditions into modern-day artistic expression and tourism. The Ashe County Arts Council is sponsoring the Barn Quilt Project, which recruits contemporary local painters to re-create patterns from the region’s centuries-old quilting heritage on the sides of barns along the area’s picturesque roads. The Arts Council is creating self-tour driving trails to showcase the paintings. Owners of old barns are starting to spontaneously create the paintings themselves. Thus the project not only re-creates but actually revitalizes an artistic tradition, giving it new meaning and fresh life for those who participate in it today. The area’s quilting patterns are no longer only to be observed, but have become an art form that can be directly engaged in. This reinforces the feeling that the arts are something to participate in and incorporate into public and private life, which in turn serves to nourish the health of the area’s other creative assets.

## Outlets for and Expressions of “Organic” Creativity

It is not enough to state that a place must have people who are creative. In every place, there is some type of creative impulse or tendency, people who can take pleasure in the practice of artistic pursuits, and who, if given the opportunity, will practice that art with others and refine their skill to the point where it can be enjoyed by others. Places that have opportunities for citizens to engage with art and with each other are more



Endless Possibilities, Manteo  
Photo: David Potorti